

# Using Vouchers for Emergency Relief in Guatemala

In May of 2010, torrential rainfall from Tropical Storm Agatha led to devastating landslides in Guatemala's highland communities and widespread flooding in lowland coastal areas. More than 150 people lost their lives, and thousands were left homeless. In conjunction with the U.S. Agency for International Development's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance, Catholic Relief Services and its local partners responded to the disaster by designing and implementing a project with integrated components to benefit more than 2,475 families in 37 of the most affected communities. A core component was the use of vouchers for emergency relief, an initiative that empowers individuals and families and strengthens local businesses.

## EMPOWERING INDIVIDUALS AND FAMILIES

For many years relief organizations typically responded to emergencies by distributing aid kits that contained sets of standard items, regardless of whether recipients needed or wanted such items. This process resulted in an inefficient delivery and allocation of supplies at a time when communities most needed to make the best use of their resources. In a strategic effort to transform the process of distributing basic items and to empower individuals and families as *participants in* rather than *beneficiaries of* aid, CRS established the means for families to purchase construction materials, basic household goods and cleaning items with voucher coupons and voucher catalogs. The vouchers could be redeemed for any combination of approved goods with local participating vendors. This approach allowed families in Guatemala to assess their own needs and purchase basic goods accordingly.



A project beneficiary signs the order form that she used to purchase cement blocks, zinc roofing sheets and heavy wire. Photos and drawings of items allowed participants with low literacy levels to use the voucher catalog. Lauren Young/CRS

It also encouraged families to take an active and dignified role in the relief and rebuilding process.

Josefina Cilis Morales, a community leader from San Lucas Tolimán, remarked on the flexibility that vouchers provided. “This woman here was looking to buy a blanket and she sorted through the entire stack, finding the one she liked the most. She could have bought a lot of soap for the price of one blanket, but that was her choice. She will go home very happy.”

One thousand families exchanged \$30 USD vouchers for sheets, blankets, towels, mosquito nets, detergent, disinfectant, brooms, buckets, brushes, basic hygiene items and other essential goods with local vendors. In another program, an innovative voucher catalog was developed to allow more than 370 families in coastal villages to purchase basic construction materials, including zinc roofing sheets, cement blocks, reinforced steel bars, aluminum beams, cement, gravel, basic construction tools and other materials. Families from remote and geographically disparate communities used the voucher catalog to select items according to their needs, without having to leave their communities. The voucher catalog’s photos and drawings of items allowed project participants with low literacy levels to successfully select goods worth \$250 USD per family. Local vendors then delivered the materials to central points within the communities.

In the community of Trocha Dos, Palo Blanco, two friends discussed their selection of construction materials. Soila Isabel Ortega explained that her family was especially strapped because her husband had been sick for a period of months. “For that reason, we decided to purchase only zinc roofing sheets. We will not need to pay a skilled laborer to install them because my grandson can do it. We do not have any extra cash now. And really, having a good roof is the most



A project participant selects items to purchase with her \$30 USD voucher at a local vendor’s store. Vouchers provided a way for families to replace household goods that were lost or damaged in the emergency and to purchase items to clean their homes after floodwaters receded. Families had the opportunity to help determine which items would be available for purchase. *Lauren Young/CRS*

important thing.” Carmen Irene Hernandez Ariasa, a younger woman with two children, explained that the walls of her home were made of wood planks and sticks and that the cement blocks and reinforced bars she purchased with the voucher catalog would be used to replace the planks and sticks and to build solid walls. She noted that her husband and a family friend, both with construction experience, would build the walls. “We all have different situations and different resources, so we make different decisions. And for all of us, it will make a big difference.”

## STRENGTHENING LOCAL BUSINESSES

Vouchers support the recovery of local economies by funneling funds into local small businesses. In Guatemala after the storm, more than \$115,000 USD in emergency project funds were channeled through six vendors in the local economies for the purchase of relief items.

Fredy Augusto Polanco Tobias, one of two participating vendors in San Lucas Tolimán, noted, “It was a rewarding experience for us to be able to help out the families through this project. It was really a great help to us, too. We sold more during the three voucher shopping days than we sometimes sell in a month.”



At a central point within the community, family members of 16 beneficiary households in Santa Ana Mixtan unload materials ordered through the voucher catalog. Families used the materials to repair their homes after heavy flooding. *Lauren Young/CRS*